

#5 Researching Risk & Wellbeing

Practising ethics guides to built environment research

Ariana Markowitz

When planning

1. Will I cause harm?
2. Will I need a support system?
3. Will I be able and willing to tap into existing practices on the ground for keeping safe?

While researching

4. Am I maximising the benefits and minimising the harms that my research might cause?
5. Am I feeling supported?
6. Am I devoting time to activities besides my research?

After finishing

7. Have I checked in with my research participants if necessary?
8. Have I adapted my support system?
9. Have I found ways of holding distressing or conflicting information?

Practising Ethics: Guides

These guides, curated by the [Bartlett's Ethics Commission](#) in collaboration with [KNOW \(Knowledge in Action for Urban Equality\)](#), and edited by Jane Rendell, (Director of the Bartlett Ethics Commission 2015-20), offer insights by experienced researchers into how to negotiate the ethical dilemmas that can arise during a research project. The aim is to help you practise built environment research ethically. David Roberts (Bartlett Ethics Fellow 2015-20) devised the format and structure of these guides to follow the ethical issues that arise during the development of a research process – from planning, to conducting, to communicating and producing outcomes – and Ariana Markowitz wrote some of the introductory text that runs across all guides. The guides focus on the different kinds of ethical issues you might encounter as a result of using specific processes or methods, and pay attention to the particular contexts and ways in which these methods are practised. Because when practising research, methods and context inform one another, we consider this series of guides as embedded in a mode of applied ethics called **situated** or **relational ethics**. Where you see words that are highlighted, they refer back to our definitions of key **ethical** principles and to terms contained in institutional protocols as found on [Practising Ethics](#).

1. *Making Images* (David Roberts)
2. *Asking Questions* (Yael Padan)
3. *Co-producing Knowledge* (Yael Padan)
4. *Staging Research* (David Roberts)
5. ***Researching, Risk, and Wellbeing*** (Ariana Markowitz)
6. *Researching Internationally* (Emmanuel Osuteye)

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Guide # 5 Researching, Risk, & Wellbeing by Ariana Markowitz

'But the process of undertaking this type of research was more than I bargained for. My experiences ranged from daunting and overwhelming to funny and gratifying. Collectively, they revealed my own vulnerabilities and resilience.' Emma Calgaro, 'If you are vulnerable and you know it raise your hand: Experiences from working in post-tsunami Thailand.' *Emotion, Space, and Society*, 17, (2015): 45–54.

About this guide: why and how built environment researchers encounter risk

Built environment research is as much about people as it is about places: the people who use and inhabit the places you are researching, the people who engage with those places emotionally or spiritually even if they are not physically present, the people who build them, and the people who own or manage them. In addition, you the researcher are necessarily a key actor: you devise the research approach, become a participant in the place where you gather data, and you determine how to interpret that data and what to do with it. Because people are unpredictable, research can also be unpredictable, and you are likely to encounter unexpected **situations** that require you to think on your feet whilst navigating high expectations with limited time. Even the best-laid plans often go awry when they come into contact with reality and real people and you will need systems in place to support you throughout that process, minimising **harm** to those participating in your research as well as to yourself. **Ethics** concerns the kind of lives we lead, the qualities of character we seek to develop, and the **responsibilities** we have for each other and our social and ecological system. To conduct research **ethically**, it is important to consider the **benefits, risks, and harms** to all connected with and affected by it.

The ethics of risk and wellbeing when researching

Negotiating **risk** and managing **wellbeing** whilst practising research present particular kinds of **ethical** challenges. Amongst them are working with gatekeepers to gain access to your research site or sites, adapting to uncertainty and recognising your limits, and navigating and communicating the emotions that practising research can provoke. Discovering your limits and being present with, and for, the people who contribute to your research are part of a more sustainable, just, and transformative practice, but they require personal awareness and a robust, multi-tiered system of support. Both of these are vital elements of a research **ethics of care**.

How to use this guide

These guides to *Practising Ethics* define appropriate ways to engage **ethically** in research. *Researching, Risk, and Wellbeing* aims to assist you in recognising the **ethical** dilemmas which arise during research and to address and **reflect** on these with confidence. It is designed to be a point of reference at any stage of your research – from planning your project, to conducting activities in the field, to communicating what you have learned through the production of particular research outputs.

Researching, Risk, and Wellbeing contains *principles, questions, guidelines* and *resources*. The *principles* in the next section inform best practice. These are not just regulatory hurdles for you to jump through at the beginning stages of your research but concepts that ground **ethical** inquiry throughout. They help you develop and refine an approach that it is **sensitive** to the physical and emotional challenges that may arise in the research process, enabling you to be a more effective researcher. The series of guiding *questions* act as prompts for you to **reflect** on the potential **ethical** considerations which emerge throughout a project, before, during, and after you conduct your research. The *guidelines* expand on the questions, illuminate the different **ethical** concerns they raise, and recommend actions which embody these principles. The *resources* section provides additional information.

These guides are not exhaustive and cannot address all the possible **situations** you will face, particularly for research on **sensitive** topics or in places experiencing violence or instability. But learning from the experiences of others, will help you gain the ability to **reflect** on what you encounter, and to make informed judgements about the best way to practise your research **ethically**. Insightful and imaginative research encompasses a range of sites, cultural contexts, and people and there will always be a need for flexibility and **care**.

Questions

When planning: *Balancing access and risk*

1. Will I cause harm?
2. Will I need a support system?
3. Will I be able and willing to tap into existing practices on the ground for keeping safe?

When conducting: *Developing informed empathy and reflexive openness*

4. Am I maximising the benefits and minimising the harms that my research might cause?
5. Am I feeling supported?
6. Am I devoting time to activities besides my research?

When producing and communicating: *Refining an ethics of care*

7. Have I checked in with my research participants if necessary?
8. Have I adapted my support system?
9. Have I found ways of holding distressing or conflicting information?

Principles

The people, places, and research methods you use and the contexts in which they are practised will each raise their own **ethical** considerations related to a common set of principles that encourage **ethical** conduct and promote interaction based on good faith and mutual **respect**.

Benefit not harm: Your research should have a **benefit** to society and any **risks** that participants could face must be minimised, balanced against the potential **benefit** to the overall community, and clearly explained to participants before they give their **consent**.

Informed consent: You need to inform your participants about the study and what is being asked of them, including any potential **risks** or **benefits**, in order for them to make an informed and voluntary decision about whether or not to participate in the research.

Confidentiality: You need to inform participants of the extent to which **confidentiality** can be assured and **respect** their right to remain **anonymous** in dissemination and display.

Guideline 1 When planning research: *Balancing access and risk*

Conducting research that matters is invigorating, but it can also be stressful and, at times, overwhelming. As the researcher, it is essential to begin balancing access and **risk** as soon as you start to negotiate ways to enter your chosen data collection site or sites and find out whether and how particular people are involved. This process continues, and may intensify, as you go deeper into your site and obtain more information.

Ethics committees normally require researchers to seek permission from relevant authorities, known as gatekeepers, before entering a space to collect data. In many **situations**, identifying the authorities – building management or owners, municipal officials, institutional administrators, and others – is straightforward. In some cases, being granted access may be equally straightforward and require only a formal letter asking permission, perhaps accompanied by a second formal letter from your institution attesting to the work that you are doing. Some gatekeepers may be responsive and enthusiastic whereas others may be indifferent, possibly even hostile, or simply unable to prioritise your request for assistance, obliging you to wait to begin your work or seek help from someone else.

Regardless of whether assistance is delayed or forthcoming, any help you receive may come with strings attached: expectations that you will portray your gatekeeper and/or their work in a positive or uncritical way, that you can facilitate connections to publicity or sources of funding, that you will provide free advice or privileged information, or any number of other small or large **benefits**. Female researchers in particular may contend with unwelcome sexual advances. Navigating these expectations could put you or your research participants at **risk**, disappointing a gatekeeper could limit your access to critical people, places, or data, and getting too close to a gatekeeper could compromise the **integrity** of your work. Finding a balance between **risk** and access may be particularly **sensitive** if your gatekeepers are themselves in **vulnerable** or compromised circumstances, or present a **conflict of interest**, due to, for example, their involvement in crime, corruption, or scandal, or if they are running for election.

In all cases, balancing access and **risk** creates uncertainty and anxiety, especially if you are working on a tight schedule. You may need to have uncomfortable conversations to clarify expectations, shift your research approach, change your study site, or even take measures to protect yourself or your participants. These measures will vary depending on **positionality**, so who you and your participants are in terms of gender, sexual orientation, relationship status, race, religion, age, migration status, nationality, personal history, and more, and where you are undertaking research. Sometimes, the adjustments you make may not fall into ‘best’ or ‘standard’ practices in research, and you may be asked to defend or explain your decisions. This can seem daunting when you made those decisions based on incomplete information or personal factors that you would prefer not to share. It is worth reminding yourself –and others– that methodology is never fixed or rigid but rather malleable, contingent, and integrative.

How you can find support

Counterbalancing competing pressures requires the development of overlapping support structures. Each person’s support will take different forms depending on who they are, their life circumstances, their personal and academic relationships, and the content of their research, but some key components could include your academic supervisor, personal tutor, and programme director; colleagues, mentors, and friends doing similar research; partners, families, and friends; and involvement in activities or organisations that enable you to decompress. What you need may evolve over the course of your research.

In addition, students may likely have access to their university’s usually free Psychological and Counselling Services. Securing an initial appointment, especially around exam times, can take time, but your supervisor or programme director may be able to advocate on your behalf if your need is urgent or if you are on a tight schedule. There is no shame in asking for support, clinical or otherwise. To the contrary, it shows a considered assessment of the ‘occupational hazards’ of research and a willingness to engage with your limits as a person as well as a scholar.

Finally, having a network of contacts on the ground in the place or places where you will conduct research is essential and should be part of what informs your site selection. These people can suggest alternative points of entry if necessary, vouch for you and your work, and provide insight into existing practices for gaining access, managing **risks**, and coping with stress, as well as interpreting cultural norms. It is important to **recognise** the expertise that 'local fixers' bring to bear on your research and, equally, to be conscious of the sacrifices they make and the **risks** they take to assist you. At the same time, you may be unable or unwilling to integrate their guidance if it is grounded in systems of beliefs that you do not share, if it requires financial resources that you do not have, or if it would steer your research in a different direction, to give a few examples.

Guideline 2 When conducting research: *Developing informed empathy and reflexive openness*

There is a common view inside and outside of academia that the value of academic research stems from its commitment to objectivity, achieved through maintaining sufficient professional distance and avoiding bias. You can see this in the neutral, measured prose in which most academic work is written.

However, you the researcher are the person making decisions about the research design, execution, and dissemination, and not simply an instrument that carries out research. In the course of a project, you may feel doubt, surprise, confusion, shock, and wonder – all these emotions and more! You may feel like you have everything under control only to watch it all unravel. Sometimes you may feel equipped to handle difficulties and at other times you may feel out of your depth. Design thinking, commonly used at The Bartlett, involves prototyping, or repeatedly creating, experimenting with, and, if necessary, discarding bare-bones models, and only carrying to the next stage the things that matter. Like design, research is also an iterative process. All research has fits and starts as the researcher tries out different approaches to see which one or ones will work. Even if these mistakes, failures, delays, and uncertainties do not feature in the final product, they are an important part of the research process.

Collecting data can provoke a range of responses depending on the content of the research and the context in which it is unfolding. Among these responses may be distressing thoughts about your life experience and the privilege from which you have **benefited** or hopelessness about the conditions around you. You may also struggle to build or maintain a productive rapport with your research participants, particularly if you know or unexpectedly discover problematic information about them – for example, that they hold beliefs that you find abhorrent or that they are involved in illegal or **unethical** activities – or if they treat you aggressively or inappropriately whilst you are engaging with them.

How you can manage your emotions as you collect data

Cultivating ‘informed empathy’¹ and compassion are indispensable in research and can be protective factors as you work to safeguard your **wellbeing** and that of your research participants. Informed empathy can help you to identify with your participants regardless of their life circumstances, activities, or behaviours, thus fostering a relationship of **trust** and mutual **respect** but without breaching your boundaries. Compassion allows you to acknowledge your limits without passing **judgment** on what they are.

One limit many researchers encounter is that of physical exhaustion. The American Psychological Association recommends keeping some energy in reserve to avoid the ‘fatigue point,’ the place at which intended performance continues to rise whilst actual performance plunges. Building your energy reserve may mean you choose to take breaks, create some distance between you and your research, and spend time doing other activities or being with family and friends.

Taking time away from your work can feel self-indulgent, especially if you are working against a deadline or under pressure from funders, teammates, or supervisors, and you may feel that you are failing to take advantage of the opportunities you have to gather more and better data. But **care** work is also work and the ‘**reflexive** openness’² that it requires – the willingness to seek support and feedback as you think critically about your research whilst navigating the context in which you are working and balancing life’s other challenges and responsibilities – is an essential component of research design and implementation.

For some people, **care** work may include elements of ‘wellness’ or ‘self-care,’ such as diet changes or practising mindfulness, but it is important to remember that **care** work has individual, communal, and institutional dimensions. Your university, your supervisor and programme director, and you the researcher all have a duty of **care** to everyone involved in the research.

Guideline 3 When producing and communicating research outputs: *Refining an ethics of care*

After you finish collecting data and move towards analysing it and disseminating it, your relationship with that data and with your experience will evolve. In the immediate aftermath, following the adrenaline of being in the field, especially if it was a sprint until the end, you may feel let down. Data collection can be a formative experience and integrating back into your normal day-to-day life may require an adjustment. Some people may withdraw during this adjustment period whereas others may be especially outgoing, and some people may become emotionally volatile whereas others may feel drained and flat. It is possible to experience all of these impulses at different times with different people.

Once you begin analysing your data, you may find that the information you collected does not show what you expected it to show or that you are still missing pieces that you need to construct your argument. If you have flexibility in your work plan or if your study site or sites are nearby, you may be able to return to verify your findings or collect additional data. If one or both of these is not the case, however, you may have to make do with what you have. Having to rethink your work, especially at what feels like a late stage of the project or if you blame yourself for the difficulties you are having, can produce anxiety. Some people respond to this anxiety with avoidance, which can compound existing time pressure.

As you **reflect** on your experience, you may doubt some of the decisions you made in terms of their **ethical** value. Perhaps questions you asked brought challenging truths to light or made things that are usually hidden visible to those you worked with, and maybe to yourself too. Particularly if you worked with people who are **vulnerable** and excluded, you may wonder how they are doing or worry whether your project exacerbated their difficult circumstances. Organising and analysing your data and writing up require you to revisit and think deeply about these decisions, difficulties, and concerns, which can be emotionally draining. In addition, finding the words and images to explain and defend your research, including capturing the voices and experiences of other people, may feel like a profound **responsibility**.

How you can continue to care for yourself and your participants

Building in some extra time at this stage of the research process creates space to **reflect** and absorb the experience of collecting information. You may find that you need to make changes to the support system you have developed, but it can be useful to check in with your main points of call including your supervisor and perhaps your programme director as well as any close mentors or confidants. These people may be able to assist you in identifying and naming challenges you are encountering, validating your experiences, and devising plans to address issues if necessary.

When you enter a space to collect data, you become part of that space and you have a **responsibility** to take ownership for the impact that your presence had. In some cases, you may want to check in with your research participants later to see if there are ways you can support them personally or through connecting them with other people or resources. Depending on the methodology you are using, you may continue to solicit your participants' involvement in the research. Regardless, it is good practice to be sure that your participants understand how they contributed to the final product and that you share research outputs with them in the format that they find most useful.

Developing and refining an **ethics of care** for research on the built environment requires continuously practising **reflexive** openness. In this way, you contribute to normalising the expectation of support, improving access to that support, and allowing you and other researchers the flexibility to take researchers' needs better into account, including when these needs are unanticipated.

Resources

The references below will help you navigate risk and manage wellbeing.

The journal *Emotion, Space, and Society* offers many examples of integrating emotions into a range of research fields, topics, and approaches. Some examples are:

Batty, Elaine. 'The Emotional Turmoil of Contract Research.' *Emotion, Space and Society* 28, (2018): 18–23.

Head, Lesley and Theresa Harada. 'Keeping the Heart a Long Way from the Brain: The Emotional Labour of Climate Scientists.' *Emotion, Space and Society* 24, (2017): 34–41.

Jones, Briony and Lisa Ficklin. 'To Walk in Their Shoes: Recognising the Expression of Empathy as a Research Reality.' *Emotion, Space and Society* 5, (2012): 103–12.

Klocker, Natascha. 'Participatory Action Research: The Distress of (Not) Making a Difference.' *Emotion, Space and Society* 17, (2015): 37–44.

The '[Trauma and Resilience in Ethnographic Fieldwork](#)' series on the blog *Anthrodendum* provides a variety of perspectives on navigating and overcoming fieldwork challenges.

Carstensen-Egwuom, Inken. 'Connecting Intersectionality and Reflexivity: Methodological Approaches to Social Positionalities.' *Erdkunde* 68, no. 4 (2012): 265–76.

Clark, Janine Natalya. 'Fieldwork and its Ethical Challenges: Reflections from Research in Bosnia.' *Human Rights Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (2012): 823–39.

Mountz, Alison, Anne Bonds, Becky Mansfield, Jenna Loyd, Jennifer Hyndman, Margaret Walton-Roberts, Ranu Basu, Risa Whitson, Roberta Hawkins, Trina Hamilton, and Winifred Curran. 'For Slow Scholarship: A Feminist Politics of Resistance through Collective Action in the Neoliberal University.' *ACME* 14, no. 4 (2015): 1235–59.

Satterthwaite, Margaret, Sarah Knuckey, Ria Singh Sawhney, Katie Wightman, Rohini Bagrodia, and Adam Brown. 'From a 'Culture of Unwellness' to Sustainable Advocacy: Organizational Responses to Mental Health Risks in the Human Rights Field.' *Review of Law and Social Justice* 28, no. 3 (2019): 443–554.

Sukarieh, Mayssoun and Stuart Tannock. 'Subcontracting Academia: Alienation, Exploitation and Disillusionment in the UK Overseas Syrian Refugee Research Industry.' *Antipode* 51, no. 2 (2019): 664–80.

Till, Karen E. 'Wounded Cities: Memory-Work and a Place-Based Ethics of Care.' *Political Geography* 31, no. 1 (2012): 3–14.

Specific to research on violence or other sensitive topics is a special issue of the journal *Geopolitics* entitled 'Fieldwork as Social Transformation: Place, Time, and Power in a Violent Moment.'

Bell-Martin, Rebecca V. and Jerome F. Marston Jr. '[Confronting Selection Bias: The Normative and Empirical Risks of Data Collection in Violent Contexts](#).' *Geopolitics* (2019).

Brigden, Noelle K. '[From La Monjita to La Hormiga: Reflections on Gender, Body, and Power in Fieldwork](#).' *Geopolitics* (2019).

Brigden, Noelle K. and Miranda Cady Hallett. '[Fieldwork as Social Transformation: Place, Time, and Power in a Violent Moment](#).' *Geopolitics* (2020).

Ellison, Susan Helen. '[Ethnography in Uncertain Times](#).' *Geopolitics* (2019).

Frank-Vitale, Amelia. 'Rolling the Windows Up: On (Not) Researching Violence and Strategic Distance.' *Geopolitics* (2019). DOI: [10.1080/14650045.2019.1662396](https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2019.1662396).

Hallett, Miranda Cady and Sandra Gruner-Domic. '[Consent, Mediation, and Complicity: The Complex Ethics of Informed Consent and Scholarly Representation in Violent Contexts](#).' *Geopolitics* (2019).

Markowitz, Ariana. '[The Better to Break and Bleed with: Research, Violence, and Trauma.](#)' *Geopolitics* (2019).

Thaler, Kai M. '[Reflexivity and Temporality in Researching Violent Settings: Problems with the Replicability and Transparency Regime.](#)' *Geopolitics* (2019).

Other readings

Baird, Adam. 'Dancing with Danger: Ethnographic Safety, Male Bravado and Gang Research in Colombia.' *Qualitative Research* 18, no. 3 (2018): 342–60.

Pearce, Jenny and Nicholas Loubere. 'Under Threat: Working in Dangerous Environments.' In *Understanding Global Development Research: Fieldwork Issues, Experiences and Reflections*, edited by Gordon Crawford, Lena J. Kruckenberg, Nicholas Loubere, and Rosemary Morgan, 155–76. Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2017.

Perôt, Concetta, Jane Chevous, and Survivors' Voices. '[Turning Pain into Power: A Charter for Organisations Engaging Abuse Survivors in Projects, Research, and Service Development.](#)' London: Survivors' Voices, 2018. Accessed 30 October 2019.

Van Damme, Ellen. 'When Overt Research Feels Covert: Researching Women and Gangs in a Context of Silence and Fear.' *Journal of Extreme Anthropology* 3, no. 1 (2019): 121–34.

The Sexual Violence Research Institute based in Pretoria, South Africa, has [an extensive list of resources on research methods.](#)

Endnotes

- 1 C. Y. Woon, 'For "emotional fieldwork" in critical geopolitical research on violence and terrorism.' *Political Geography*, 33:1, (2013): 31–41.
- 2 K. Thaler, 'Reflexivity and temporality in researching violent settings: Problems with the replicability and transparency regime.' *Geopolitics*, (2019): 1–27.

Bio

Ariana Markowitz is a member of the [Women Doing Fieldwork Network](#) and also co-administers a private Google group for researchers and practitioners working on violence and other sensitive topics to share resources, collaborate, and support each other.

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